

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Blessed - The Autobiography

George Best

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## About the Author

Co-author Roy Collins has been a sports columnist for over 17 years and is a personal friend of George Best. A chief sports writer on *Today* for ten years, followed by the *People*, Roy writes for the *Guardian* and *Sunday Telegraph* and has co-written the autobiography of Frank Warren.

G E O R G E  
B E S T

WITH ROY COLLINS

B L E S S E D  
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY



*For the boys of '68, who helped  
fulfil one of my dreams  
and my beautiful wife Alex,  
who continues to fuel those dreams.*

## PROLOGUE

# THE 'OTHER WOMAN'

I WAS IN such agony that if someone had offered me a pill to end it all, I wouldn't have hesitated to take it.

Death would at least have ended the dreadful, persistent pain - the worst I've ever known - which felt as though a knife was being twisted in my stomach. But despite weeks of this pain, weeks of throwing up and coughing up blood, which is the most frightening sign that you are really seriously ill, I refused to accept that I was in need of urgent hospital treatment.

My wife Alex, as you can imagine, had been growing increasingly frantic in her pleas to me to go in, sometimes trying to cajole me and at other times threatening to leave me to suffer alone. Just like you do with a kid. Also, unbeknown to me, she had begun crushing up vitamin pills to put in the little bit of food that I had been managing to eat, though I rarely kept anything down for long. She also began crushing up tablets of milk thistle, which helps to clean out the liver.

Given the amounts of booze I've put away, it was like trying to dilute a vat of scotch with a thimble full of water but you could understand her doing it. She had also been reading all the medical books she could get her hands on and knew that everything pointed to me having cirrhosis, though without being unkind to her, I think anyone could have worked that out.

I knew it myself but there was always something inside me, that little inner voice, which said that it didn't matter whether my condition was caused by booze or something else. If I was going to die, I told myself - and I did think it was a distinct possibility - it had to be something, so why blame the booze? Everyone always blamed the booze. Slowly but surely, though, it started to sink in that I could get treatment, could do something about this pain and that it would involve going off the drink. Of course, that's the bit that I didn't want to accept so I kept on pretending.

If I ever had any doubts about my condition, I only had to look in the bathroom mirror to dispel them. I had noticed my skin starting to turn yellow, the first traces of jaundice which comes with cirrhosis. My face was pinched and I had begun to lose so much weight that my clothes looked as though they had been bought for someone two sizes bigger.

I'd started to feel ill just after Jimmy Tarbuck's 60th birthday bash in February 2000. The invitations read:

*Men - dinner jackets; women - posh frocks; food - upmarket fish and chips*

And that's what was served up at Tarby's golf club for celebrities like Cilla Black, Ronnie Corbett, Russ Abbott, Robert Powell, Michael Parkinson and Adam Faith. It was a fantastic evening but I had not been on my best form for a while so I'd decided to book a week at Forest Mere health club in Hampshire.

For years, this had been my pathetic answer to a lifetime of drinking to excess - going to a health club four or five times a year and believing that it balanced out the drink, even though I often knocked back wine when I was in one of those places. Sometimes, I would actually come out in a worse state than when I went in but I still convinced myself

that I had been doing myself some good, sorting out my problem. Unfortunately, there is no solution to alcohol.

You can't make it go away.

I also got another sign at Forest Mere that things were seriously wrong. I was about to step in the shower one day when I noticed a little spot on my leg, the sort of thing we all get. Automatically, I scratched it and it started to bleed. And bleed. And bleed. It's something everyone has done at one time or another but it was unbelievable that this little spot was producing so much blood. Before I knew it, the floor was covered in it and I was surrounded by blood-stained toilet paper and tissues which I had used to try to stop it. Eventually, Alex managed to get a plaster on it but for the next couple of days, the blood continued to seep out. It was a sign - but not one I cared to take any notice of.

As for the drink, I wasn't really interested in trying to make it go away. Quite the opposite in fact, as true to form, I looked for the solution to my stomach problems not in a bottle of medicine but one of brandy. I was not supposed to drink the stuff in normal circumstances because it wasn't good for my blood pressure, though some of the bar staff at my local pub in Chelsea, the Phene Arms, would always slip me one.

Now, I began to drink more and more of it, sometimes starting soon after I got up, on top of the daily wine lake I was putting away. And, of course, the more I drank, the more the pain eased. So with the logic of an alcoholic, I reckoned that more was better. Naturally it helped, but as the pain was caused by my liver screaming for mercy, it was making my condition even more chronic.

But I wouldn't go into hospital because I knew what the 'treatment' would entail. No more of my own medicine.

Alex and Phil Hughes, my agent and friend, who have both seen me through some pretty bad times, realised long before me that this was something serious. Or, at least, they accepted it long before me. They were now begging

me to go to hospital on a daily basis but I continued on the brandy self-help diet and rolled into the Phene every day. It had become as familiar as my own living room.

Then, when I was sitting in my usual seat in the corner one afternoon, something amazing happened. The pub door slowly opened and I looked up to see one of the old regulars who hadn't been in for a while. I didn't recognise him at first because he was so frail and thin and when I realised who it was, I was absolutely shocked. His skin and eyes were completely yellow and his cheeks were almost hollow. Needless to say, he had just been diagnosed with cirrhosis.

Now, my skin had started turning yellow but it was nothing like this guy's. He looked ten times worse than me and how he survived, I will never know. I knew from my jaundice that things were not right but here I was looking at the next stage of my condition, I was looking at me in a few days' or weeks' time, if that long. It terrified me and the timing of this guy coming into the pub also made it seem as though it was meant as a warning to me. It certainly helped me make the final decision to go into hospital.

One thing that had allowed me to keep up the pretence was that I still felt reasonably fit in myself, though I would hardly have described myself as athletic. But all of a sudden, almost overnight, I had no energy whatsoever. I was completely drained and I couldn't do anything. Alex had to dress me, feed me, even take my socks off for me. And all the time, I was suffering this awful stomach pain, literally doubled up with it. My resistance was wearing thin and Alex was stepping up the pressure.

Finally, one day, when I was curled up on the bed like a baby, she told me she was calling an ambulance.

This time, I did not resist.

They took me to the Chelsea and Westminster, which was only round the corner, and they practically had to carry me in. But despite the pain I was in and my dodgy right knee which has never been completely right since my playing days, I wouldn't let them put me in a wheelchair. I wasn't taking the risk of having that picture plastered all over the newspapers the next morning.

The doctors did a lot of tests and also gave me a shot which took away the pain - in hindsight, probably not the best thing to do because I thought I was OK and refused to be admitted. Alex was absolutely furious after the effort she'd put in getting me there. But I thought I would go home and take some time off the booze, as if that was going to make any difference at this stage.

And when I say some time off, it could have been a month, a week, a day, or just a couple of hours.

I certainly could not accept at that stage that my long, and often undistinguished drinking career might be over. But if I was going to have to go dry for a while, then I wanted to suffer the horrors of withdrawal in the privacy of my own home, rather than in a hospital bed gawped at by all sorts of people.

Anyone who only drinks socially will at some time have suffered the familiar symptoms of a hangover, the throbbing head, the nausea and a throat like sawdust. But only an alcoholic knows the real suffering that comes when the hangover is finished and the discomforts of withdrawal kick in; the sweats, the palpitations and the panic. Going cold turkey, the drug addicts call it, and that's as good a description as any, seeing that you spend a lot of time shivering, even if you're in bed under a pile of blankets or sitting by a roaring fire.

I've never had the full DTs with hallucinations of mice running up the curtains, which you see in movies like *The Lost Weekend*. But there have been times when I've stopped and, for a few days, felt like shit, sweating and

suffering hot and cold sweats. I've also had the shakes so badly that I've been unable to hold anything. And alcohol is such a weird drug that you know that if you have a drink, the shakes will stop, so you're still fighting temptation even as you're committing yourself to withdrawal.

When I was in the Vesper Hospital in California in the early Eighties, during one of my many failed attempts to give up, I also saw people go through horrendous withdrawals as they tried to come off hard drugs, all sorts of people from 14-year-old kids to 70-year-old grandmothers. They were so bad that the rest of us, who were hardly in a fit state ourselves, used to take it in turns to go into their room and try to help them through it. It was frightening to see them.

This time, the horrors were not that bad, though I spent the whole week in our Chelsea apartment, feeling like death. As well as looking after me, Alex spent the time talking to medical people at the Lister Hospital, who told her that the man I must see was Professor Roger Williams at the Cromwell Hospital, a leading expert in the treatment of cirrhosis. She and Phil made the necessary arrangements and on 8 March 2000, I reported to Professor Williams.

It felt a bit like giving myself up to the police, which I have also done in my time, and it is not being over-dramatic to say that there wasn't a minute to lose. I wasn't due to be admitted at that point, it was supposed to have been an initial consultation, after which the Professor would give me a date to come in. But he didn't even need to examine me. He just looked at my eyes, which were now as yellow as that guy in the pub, and told me, 'You're in.'

I had walked into his office at four o'clock in the afternoon and fifteen minutes later I was in bed in the liver unit, attached to a saline drip.

I just felt enormous relief.

Whereas a week earlier, I had been quite happy to go home from the Chelsea and Westminster and suffer, I'd somehow come to terms with the fact that I had to go through the treatment, whatever it took. And I had already suffered enough at home - I'd taken a hell of a lot. But what I hadn't come to terms with was the fact that I wouldn't be able to drink again. Only an alcoholic can see a silver lining in those circumstances and I managed it. Deep down, I knew I wouldn't be going anywhere for some time but I told myself that I'd be in for a few days, a week at most, and then I'd be well enough to carry on as normal and when I felt like a drink, I would have one.

Having been admitted so quickly, I had not packed any hospital things, so the following day Alex went out and bought me three pairs of pyjamas, all identical - the nursing staff must have thought I never changed them. She also brought in the national newspapers, which were full of my obituaries. The papers had obviously got hold of the story late in the day and not knowing whether my condition was life-threatening or not, they'd decided to cover themselves just in case.

It's a funny feeling reading your own obituaries. But most of the writers were pretty kind and reports of my death gave me hours of entertainment.

I wish I could have said the same about the results of my blood tests, which made for the grimmest of reading. The Gamma GT score, a liver enzyme which gives the clearest indication of damage, rings bells with the doctors if it's over 80. Mine was somewhere around the 900 mark and the bilirubin test, which is the yellow pigment associated with jaundice, was also totally off the scale.

They have a three number system for the sort of liver condition I was suffering from - if you are assessed at one, it means you can expect a full recovery if you stay off drink for a while; two suggests a normal recovery, whatever that might be, and three is full-blown cirrhosis. I was teetering

between two and three when I went in, which at least gave me some hope.

Not that Professor Williams was in the mood to encourage my fantasies of boozing again. He was brilliantly and brutally honest, telling me exactly what was wrong and what I'd have to do. Putting it in layman's terms for me, he explained that my liver had basically run up the white flag and that just one more drink could kill me. I quickly became friends with him and his assistant, Dr Akeel Alisa, and, seeing as I was my own worst enemy, they were just the sort of friends I needed.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night on my own, the blackness came over me and that little voice inside me told me that this was all a waste of time and that I should discharge myself. Had it been a couple of years earlier, I would definitely have listened. I would have got up one night, torn out the drip, got dressed, walked out of the hospital, jumped on a plane and had done with it.

But I didn't. There was something else that told me that I mustn't give up. I had decided that I wanted to be around for a while and if I had done anything to myself, it would have been incredibly selfish and so hurtful to Alex, to my friend Phil, to my dad, to my son, Calum, to the rest of my family and to all the people who sent goodwill messages. Besides, I would be out soon enough and for all I knew, back to my old ways. Professor Williams had made it clear that I couldn't drink again but I reasoned that doctors and their ilk always paint the blackest picture they can.

Drink is the only opponent I have been unable to beat, even though I've tried Alcoholics Anonymous, abstinence and, on a couple of occasions, having Antabuse pellets sewn into my stomach, which last for three months and make you violently ill if you so much as sip a drop of booze. Even they didn't stop me.

Before the pellets I had tried Antabuse tablets in America, which you take orally and, naturally, I had to test whether they really worked, didn't I? I'd gone on a weekend break to Lake Tahoe for a spot of gambling and on the second night, before dinner, I thought I would try a cocktail, just to see if I could get away with it.

I walked into a casino and ordered a large vodka but before I was halfway through it, my face started to break out in red blotches and I could feel my heart racing at 100 miles an hour.

Another time, I went almost a whole year without booze and then, with the logic only an alcoholic could understand, went out to celebrate and began another bender.

When you are an alcoholic, drink is your whole life. Nothing else matters, as I was to prove when Calum was born in 1981 and to my shame, I was unable to stop even for him. Alex is right when she says that before I went into hospital, I was either drinking or thinking about drinking. But I didn't believe I had a problem because I seemed to be leading a fairly normal life and I was earning a living.

It wasn't like the wild old days when I was out of it for days on end. Even when footballers like Tony Adams and Paul Merson admitted they had problems and sought professional help, I didn't relate my situation to theirs. I really thought I had drink cracked because I was doing hundreds of after-dinner speeches and other public appearances in front of big audiences and never blotting my copy book.

Well, only on the odd occasion.

At times, people sitting next to me at dinners would remark about how little I drank. They seemed almost disappointed and I remember saying to one guy, 'Look, if we were to have a competition, you would come second. I just choose not to drink much tonight.'

That was both the old ego rising up inside me and classic self-delusion, kidding myself that I could choose to

drink or not to. One doctor even told me that drink was like a tap that you could switch on or off. As you can imagine, I was really pleased to hear that from a doctor, though I know now that once I turn on the tap, I leave it running.

Even the consequences of my boozing – and some of those have been pretty catastrophic – had no effect on my desire for it. Drink began to destroy my football career almost as soon as it started.

I was 22 when I won the European Cup with Manchester United in 1968 and was named European Footballer Of The Year. It should have been the start of a glittering career but was really the beginning of the end. Drink was the ‘other woman’ which caused the breakdown of my first marriage to Angela MacDonald James and, at times, has brought on some madness that has put my marriage to Alex at risk.

Drink also led me to Pentonville Prison in 1984 after a drink-driving offence, which would almost certainly not have led to jail if I hadn’t headbutted a policeman.

Worst of all, three months into the new millennium, drink almost claimed my life. Yet when they finally let me out of the Cromwell in the week after Easter, following eight long weeks, I still couldn’t say that I would never have another drink. Of course, I said so publicly but to an alcoholic, lying comes as second nature. It was also easy to say so because I didn’t fancy a drink after all I had been through.

But as I took my first faltering steps back into the real world, looking and feeling a hundred years old, I couldn’t admit to myself that my drinking career was over.

And twelve months on, I still can’t.

## CHAPTER ONE

# RUNNING UP THE HILL

WHEN MY MUM died an alcoholic in 1978, it annoyed and upset me that a number of journalists started sniffing into our family background, trying to find this reason or that for why she started drinking and why I drank.

An alcoholic doesn't need a reason to drink, though naturally there were lots of factors involved in my mum's drinking and my own. And as painful as some of them are, I will deal with them as honestly as I can in this book, though I have never liked talking about family matters in public. I certainly didn't appreciate the tabloid press trying to insinuate all sorts of things about my mother at a time when I was trying to come to terms with her death.

Yes, she had her problems, like many other mums trying to bring up six children in post-war Britain. But her drinking problems started much later on, long after I had left home. It was tougher for my brothers and sisters but my memories of her as a child are only happy ones.

She was a fantastic mum and growing up was brilliant, it really was. We never had much money but then nor did anyone else on the Cregagh Estate in Belfast, where we moved when I was three and where my dad, Dickie, still lives in our old family home on Burren Way. I was born on 22 May 1946, when everyone was trying to get back on their feet after the war and rationing meant that even the most basic foods were in short supply.

Like most kids then, I spent a lot of time with my grandparents because both parents had to work to make ends meet. My dad worked shifts on an iron turner's lathe at the Harland and Wolff shipyard, so you never knew when he would be home. Mum worked for a time at Gallagher's tobacco factory, where a lot of my friends' mums also worked. Then she began at an ice-cream factory, which helped develop my love for the stuff, though really I should have eaten enough to turn me off for life because I would walk in whenever I felt like it and pick one off the production line. In Belfast slang, we talked of a poke and a slider - a cone and a wafer in anyone else's language. The family's part-time jobs kept me in treats because one of my aunts worked in a chippy and another worked in a sweet shop.

Literally as soon as I could walk, I had a ball at my feet. One of the first photographs taken of me was outside my granny and grandad Withers's house when I was about 13 months old, with a ball at my feet. It didn't really matter what sort of ball it was - plastic, a tennis ball, anything I could kick around. Sometimes, I would even take a ball to bed with me.

When I started at Nettlefield Primary School, which was close to my granny Withers, I would dash back at lunchtime for a slice of toast and a cup of tea and five minutes later I was back in the school yard, kicking a ball around. It was the same after school. And the bread was only toasted on one side because they used a little electric fire and as soon as one side was done, they would switch it off to save electricity.

Years later, Mrs Fullaway, my landlady at Manchester United, gave me a worried look one day.

'I do butter your bread on the right side don't I?' she asked. 'The toasted side?'

With mum and dad both working, I didn't see them until the evening, when they would often have friends over to

play cards, which was what people did before television came along. I would sit and watch them for ages. I had no understanding of how the games were played but I was just fascinated by the cards themselves, the colour of them and the slightly scary picture cards. I would watch for hours until I fell asleep, when mum would excuse herself from the card table for a few minutes while she carried me up to bed.

I would always wake up when she got me upstairs, though, and after a bit of pleading, she would let me come down for another twenty minutes. She was a beautiful-looking woman, my mum, too, though she was also the tough one of my parents. My dad was so easy-going, he would not have dreamed of laying a finger on me. My mum was very quiet, too, though if I stepped out of line, she would give me what she called a good skelping, which is a slapping across the back of the legs.

I was so skinny that she would hurt herself more than me because I was all bone. And she had to catch me first because when I knew a skelping was coming, I'd run upstairs and crawl under the bed and roll up into a little ball so that she couldn't get me.

My sister Carol was born only a year after me and five years later, Barbara came along. I was always close to Carol, I suppose because there is only 17 months difference in our ages. She didn't share my love of football, it wasn't really a girls' thing then. But we used to fool around a lot together in the house, having mock fights, a lot of pushing and shoving, the normal brother and sister thing.

One day, though, it got a bit too boisterous and she hit me right in the solar plexus. It was a punch Lennox Lewis would have been proud of and for a minute or two, I couldn't breathe. She was absolutely terrified and convinced that she had killed me. She still talks about that incident today.

Carol has followed in Grandad Withers's footsteps as the religious one in the family and as its head, if you want to put it like that. When my mother died, she took it upon herself to look after my dad, cleaning the house and cooking for him. And if anyone in the family has any problems, it's Carol they call. She just seems to have this spiritual thing, this peace of mind, and you will never hear her say a bad word about anyone. She lives just down the road from me now so we're always popping in and out of each other's houses and we're probably closer than we've ever been.

My other grandad, James 'Scottie' Best, lived right beside the Glentoran football ground, The Oval. Now growing up in those days, even football support was divided on sectarian grounds, I suppose it still is, really. If you were a Protestant, you automatically supported Linfield and if you were a Catholic you supported Glentoran, or the Glens as we called them. Our family were Protestant, Free Presbyterians to be exact, but because Grandad Best lived next to the Glens' ground, I supported them.

Almost every week I would go with my dad or grandad or some friends and stand by the Oval entrance. That's what you did then, you stood by a turnstile and waited for an adult to come along and lift you over. They got pretty big crowds because everyone had been starved of sport during the war, and the adults would pass us kids over their heads like a human conveyor belt until we got to the front. I didn't have any trouble with the religious bit because nobody wore scarves and we were forty years away from the replica shirt craze. The most you might wear was a club rosette.

My mum and dad were never that religious but Grandad Withers was and out of respect for him, we all went to church on Sunday. The grown-ups went to the morning service and we kids went to afternoon Sunday school,

which I enjoyed. I liked the singing and reading the bible and, even now, I still pray at times. When I was first at Manchester United, I actually used to kneel by my bed at night and say my prayers. After church, we all had Sunday tea together, the whole family. It would be salads and spuds and Granny Withers's home-made cakes.

After potatoes, cakes were the staple diet of all our families. My mother's speciality was apple tarts, though at Halloween she used to make these delicious candy apples. When I moved back to Ireland, I asked Carol to give the recipe to Alex, but she hasn't made any yet. My mother just never stopped because she had to fit in all the jobs of a housewife around her work. Sometimes, she wouldn't get home until ten at night, when we'd all be in bed of course. But we would hear her cleaning the windows. We had those big brass handles on the outside and she would be leaning out of the window with a duster and a tin of Brasso at ten o'clock, cleaning them.

If it was a hot summer and they were extra busy at the ice-cream factory, she would have to work on a Sunday, which didn't really meet with Grandad Withers' approval. On those days, my dad would make her a chicken pie, which was one of her favourite dishes, and then he'd heat it and wrap it up really tight so that it would stay warm, and he'd cycle off to the creamery to deliver her lunch. It saw a lot of service, that bike. When their shifts overlapped, mum would take the bike to work in the daytime and when she came home, dad would pedal off to the shipyard for the night shift.

In the school holidays, we would visit Granny Withers's summer cottage in Crossgar, which is on the other side of the Strangford Lough, close to where Alex and I live now. My uncle George Withers, who was a year younger than me, used to come, so he and I and my cousin Louis, who is

my mum's sister's boy, were just like three lads together. There was an old barn at the back of Granny's house and we would go round there, the three of us and beat lumps out of each other. We grandly called them boxing matches but they were basically free-for-alls. There was a steep hill that ran down from the house to the main road and I loved running down that at full pelt and I would also run up it, though a little more slowly.

There was no electricity and no oil lamps, the lights were all gas and we had a big stove which kept the place warm. But it was a great life down there. We would get up before the sun and bring in the cows for milking and then collect the fresh eggs, a luxury after the privations of Belfast. We'd help to bale the hay, as well - proper little country boys we were - and the local farmer had a donkey in a field which we used to jump on and ride around. By the end of the day, we were absolutely knackered but also famished.

Our evening meal was a plate of spuds, supplemented by granny's home-made bread and cakes. That was Ireland then - spuds were everyone's staple diet, they were all people could afford. At least there were plenty of them and we had competitions to see who could eat the most. I believe I still hold the record with 23.

I don't remember ever getting any official pocket money but I had my own methods of obtaining some illicitly to keep myself in sweet money. My mum used to collect sixpences, or tanners, in an old milk bottle which she hid under the sink and the coins were slightly too big to go in so she would file the inside of the bottle top until they just fitted. I don't know how she planned to get them out, maybe she was going to break the bottle, but after a bit of practice, I devised a way of fiddling them out. I would only take one at a time, mind, in case she cottoned on, and in any case, a sixpence lasted you for ever at that age.

I was a right little villain, though it all seemed pretty innocent at the time. But I always liked to plan things. In the local shop, they sold biscuits in those big glass jars and just before they closed, they would give you the broken ones, the ones they couldn't sell, in a little paper bag, a sweetie bag they called it. So my mates and I would go in five minutes before closing, pretend to look around and break the biscuits ourselves. And on the way home, we used to pass a big house with a huge apple tree hanging over the wall so we'd pinch a couple of those to eat with our biscuits. Or, at night, we would call in at the local chippy, Eddie Spencer, which is still going, funnily enough, and he would give us the scrapings from the fryer.

I started collecting stamps at that time and if I didn't have any money, I would steal them from Woolworths. Again, I had a plan, picking up six or seven packets to look at and then deliberately dropping them on the floor.

The shopkeeper would start to come over but I'd say, 'It's OK, I'll pick them up,' only I would put just four or five packets back. Of course, they didn't have security cameras then so you didn't have to be a criminal mastermind to get away with such scams.

I also helped out a man who drove around in a van selling fruit and vegetables, for which I earned a few coppers and, on a Friday night I collected the paper money from the people who had their newspapers delivered from the local shop. This also turned out to be lucrative, since people would often give me 15 pence to settle a 14 pence bill. I would pretend to fumble in my pocket for the penny change and then say, 'Sorry, I haven't got it. I'll give it to you next week.'

But I never did and 99 times out of a hundred, people would forget to ask. If I could do that to 20 people, by the end of the night I had 20 pence, which was just over three sixpences. And if someone didn't ask for a receipt, I could

pocket 20 pence in one go. How I didn't get caught, I'll never know.

In summer, I would spend my ill-gotten gains at the local funfair. It was one of the highlights of our year when it rolled into town and set up just off the Cregagh Road, in a lovely place called Dallywinkers Lane. Of course, a kid's money doesn't go far at an exciting place like a funfair so when our cash ran out, which was after a few minutes, we had another fiddle going. I loved playing on the hoopla stalls because you could win a prize and we decided to work the odds in our favour by taking along a big stick with a hook on it. Then, while some of us created a diversion, the others would have a few seconds to try to hook something for themselves.

Through the magic of television, I fell in love with another football team. Wolverhampton Wanderers.

After they won the League Championship in 1954, Wolves took on some of the world's top clubs in floodlight matches at their Molineux ground. There were no official European competitions then so these were more than just friendlies. They were Britain against the rest of the world and they were taken so seriously that they were televised live, which was unheard of for games outside internationals. What's more, they were midweek games played under floodlights, which were still a novelty. Though a crude form of floodlighting existed back in 1878, the modern version only started in the 1951-52 season and was still a rarity when I began watching Wolves, the first team outside Northern Ireland that I was able to watch live on television. It was love at first sight.

We didn't have a telly ourselves so when I knew there was a game on, I would go and kick a ball on the wall outside my neighbour's house about ten minutes before kick-off. He was a man called Mr Harrison and, naturally, he would hear me kicking the ball against his wall. He also

knew I was a football nut. But he would let me sweat until just before the game started and would then open the door and say casually, as though the idea had just come to him, 'Do you fancy coming in and watching the game with me?'

I was in his house like a shot but the next time Wolves were on television, we would play out the whole charade again.

Mr Harrison only had a small black and white set and TV crews then probably only used one camera, as opposed to the hundred or so they have today. But when Wolves played sides like Moscow Spartak and Moscow Dynamo, it was as though they were playing against aliens. As far as we were concerned, the Russians were bogeymen, they could have come from another planet. And yet here they were playing against Wolves on television.

I was mesmerised by those games. The football was fantastic and there were 55,000 fans locked inside Molineux for every one of them. But it was the floodlights which made them magical for me, made football into theatre. I had already begun a scrapbook on Glentoran, in which I pasted all the match reports from the *Belfast Telegraph*. Now, I turned the book upside down and in the back, I began pasting in reports of Wolves.

I also dreamed of wearing their famous gold shirt, though we had to imagine how those shirts really looked. On Mr Harrison's black and white TV, they could have been pale blue, or light green or even boring old white.

Apart from not being able to watch the football whenever I wanted, I didn't really miss TV because we had the local cinema, which was packed out for the Saturday afternoon matinees. Fortunately, there was a glass shortage at the time, so they would let you in for free if you turned up with a jam jar. And if my pals and I couldn't rustle up enough jars, one of us would go in and slip open the side door for the others.

The shows then were just magical, stuff like *Hopalong Cassidy* and *Quatermass and the Pit*. Epics were also all the rage and the first feature film I saw was *Shane*, starring Alan Ladd. Then I saw *The Robe*, another epic with Victor Mature, and *Spartacus*, which starred Kirk Douglas. I remember reading that the movie cost \$12 million to make and employed over 10,000 people, which seemed staggering at the time. *Zorro* was a big favourite as well and when we came out of the cinema, we would fasten our macs around our necks and run home pretending to be him. We also had yo-yo competitions on the stage.

On some Saturdays, I would watch my mum playing hockey, and I would dribble a tennis ball along the touchline during the match. But I never went to see my dad play football, though I know he was a full back and everyone told me he was a dirty little so-and-so. He had no fear whatsoever, that's what they said about him.

There were plenty of hard men from the shipyards and they had a summer football tournament in Belfast at a place called the chicken run. They played so many games on it that there wasn't a blade of grass left and all the players had nicknames. I remember there was one player who only had one arm, though luckily, I don't think he was a goalkeeper. And I remember a guy called Sticky Sloan, he was one of the local heroes. He could play a bit but he was as hard as nails like most of the players. If you didn't get smacked four or five times in a game, you were a big softy.

Sunday morning football didn't exist then, because it was a day for religion and even when Grandad Withers got a telly, we weren't allowed to watch programmes on a Sunday. Of course, when he went up for his afternoon nap, we kids would turn it on low and we would take it in turns to sit on the bottom of the stairs in case he woke up. We thought we were being so clever but I'm sure he knew what was going on because when he got up, he would walk past the telly and touch it, to see if it was warm.

My life at that time seemed idyllic, but as I approached my eleventh birthday, it was all about to change.

I was right in the middle of my Eleven Plus exams. One afternoon I popped into a local shop to buy a ruler for my maths test and the shopkeeper said something very odd. She asked me when my grandfather was getting married.

I looked at her like she was nuts but I must have had my mind on the exam and not heard her properly. It was only when I got home and saw Mum and Dad's faces that I realised that what she had really said was 'buried'. It was a shattering experience for me because I was so close to Grandad George, whom I was named after, and I knew that I was always his favourite.

You never think your parents or grandparents will die, not at that age. They've always been there and you think they'll be there forever. I couldn't understand it and, as I was to do for the rest of my life, I tried to walk away and pretend it wasn't happening. I just walked and walked the streets for hours, tears streaming down my face, until I got too tired and had to sit down. My parents, who had gone spare with worry, found me sitting under a lamppost in the pouring rain at one in the morning.

When someone dies in Northern Ireland, all the family get together and the coffin is left open for everyone to pay their last respects. But on the day of the funeral, only the men go to the graveside, and then to the pub afterwards, while the women stay behind and get the food ready. I didn't look at my grandfather's coffin, I didn't want to see a cold corpse, not when I remembered him as such a warm, lovely man. I couldn't look at my mum after she died, either. I've never seen a dead body and I've really no desire to.

Despite the sadness of my grandad's death I managed to pass the Eleven Plus and my parents were delighted. I was the only one in my class to do so. Me passing was a big

thing for Mum and Dad, even though it meant more expense for them, buying school uniform and shoes. Shoes were the biggest outlay for them because with the time I spent kicking a ball about, I must have gone through a pair every fortnight. Like everyone's mum and dad, they warned me not to kick a ball in my 'best' shoes, but like every other kid, I carried on doing it anyway.

So while all my mates went to the local secondary modern school, Lisnasharragh Secondary Modern, I had to travel on my own to Grosvenor High Protestant School, which was two bus rides away.

Things there started going wrong from the start. It wasn't that I couldn't do the work. I was a bright kid and particularly good at maths and English. But I didn't like the journey to school, I didn't like the other kids and I didn't really try that hard to make friends because all my pals still lived on the Cregagh Estate and I would rush home at night to play with them.

The problem with Grosvenor High was that the school sport was rugby, which I had no alternative but to play. I was pretty good, too, and because of my size and quickness, I turned myself into a pretty decent fly half. But rugby could never produce the sort of passion inside me that watching Wolves and those Russians did.

The lack of football was just another reason for my not settling in the school and it wasn't long before I began mitching, as we called it, or playing truant. At times, I would stay away altogether and spend my bus money on sweets but mostly I'd hide in the school toilets as the kids went back to their classes after lunch and then I'd climb over the roof and come home. My aunt Margaret worked all day, so I would hide my bag behind her dustbin and walk around Woolworths and the other shops for the rest of the afternoon.

If I got fed up with that and wanted to go home, I would buy these sweets which, if you sucked them hard enough,

would make your throat go red.

'What's the matter? What are you doing home at this time?' Mum would say when I knocked on our door.

'They've sent me home with a sore throat,' I'd say.

'Let's have a look at you,' she'd reply.

I would open my mouth.

'That looks nasty, we'll have to get you to a doctor,' Mum would decide.

The next day I would say I was better, but it backfired on me in the end because Mum and Dad got so fed up with this recurring red throat that they made me have my tonsils out and I couldn't protest because it would have given the game away.

Truancy was just another way of running away from problems and I always did it on my own. I have always been like that and in later years, when fame became too much, I would go to Manchester Airport and get the first plane out to wherever it was going. It's an instinctive thing, kidding yourself that when you get back, the problem will have gone, though you know that nine times out of ten, it will be worse.

Naturally, I couldn't go on playing truant without the school doing something about it. I knew this something would involve a lot of heartache for my mum and dad and they were devastated when they were called in to see the headmaster. They had no idea what had been going on and they were the sort of people who would have been totally ashamed to be summoned like that.

The school gave me a choice. Either I could drop down a grade or leave. Now I was in the highest grade and it would have been humiliating to drop down but I didn't want to disappoint my mum and dad by leaving so I said I would do it. My heart wasn't in it, though, and about a month later, I told the school that I wanted to leave after all and I joined all my pals at Lisnasharragh.

The first day I went there, the boys were in the corner picking a school football team and asked me if I wanted to play.

Immediately, I felt like I belonged.

The other reason I had been so unhappy was that Grosvenor High School was in the middle of a Catholic area and the kids from the other schools, like the Sacred Heart and places like that, knew from my uniform that I was Protestant. They used to wait for me and call me a Proddy bastard and try to steal my scarf or cap so that in the end I would wait down the road from the bus stop and time my run to perfection so that I could reach the bus and jump on to the platform just as it was taking off. It was like running the gauntlet. It wasn't very nice but it turned out to be good sprint training for my football. Knowing this had been happening to me had also made it easier for my parents to agree to me leaving.

Religion has never bothered me and there is no way you could ever call my family bigots. But if you were a Protestant, you joined the Orange Order, as I did, and my dad and grandad both had spells as master of our local lodge.

12 July, the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne, was a big day in our house and all the family would turn out for the parade. The meeting point for many of the marchers would be the master of the lodge's house and I remember how excited we all were when my dad was the master and all these people started gathering in our street.

It was such a colourful and noisy scene, everyone there in their sashes and finery and the pipers and drummers warming up. I know it is a sectarian festival but the Troubles hadn't taken such a violent hold then and, to us, it was just pipes and drums and cakes. And fun. The whole thing was just a carnival. After everyone had arrived at my dad's house, we walked up to the town centre to meet the